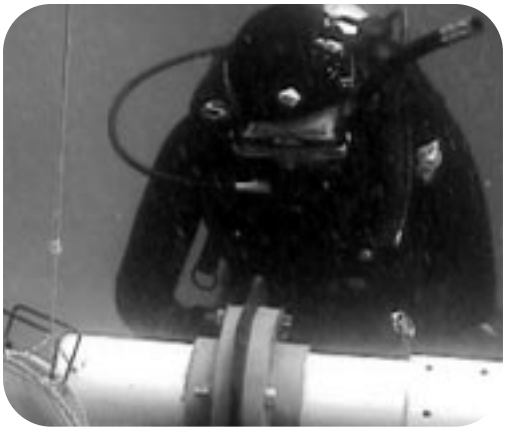
# NOAA Trains Working Divers in the Keys

Cheva Heck, FKNMS Public Affairs Officer

This winter, eighteen National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) employees attended an intensive training course designed to prepare them to perform scientific and technical tasks underwater.

The NOAA working diver class is designed to take non-divers and give them the skills necessary to complete scientific and work diving tasks. NOAA operates the largest federal civilian diving program, and the history of NOAA diving dates back to 1971, one year after the agency was established. Thirty years later, more than 300 NOAA divers average more than 10,000 dives per year, with a safety record of 99.97%.



A diver practices underwater work techniques in the Florida Keys Community College lagoon.

NOAA divers deploy and retrieve scientific instruments such as tidal gauges, document the behavior of marine animals, perform ship repair and maintenance, assess the impact of humans on the environment, and locate and chart submerged objects. Here in the Keys, NOAA divers install mooring buoys, assess and restore reefs damaged by vessel groundings, and track marine life populations.

The NOAA Dive Center trains new divers three times per year. The Florida Keys Community College hosts the Keys training. More than half the students in this year's class are in the NOAA Corps, NOAA's uniformed service. Several work for the National Marine Fisheries Service and four are part of the National Marine Sanctuary System.

Referred to by graduates as "dive boot camp," working diver training involves extensive classroom and in-water instruction, beginning with snorkeling techniques in the pool and progressing to basic SCUBA skills. Once these are mastered, students gain experience working underwater. Practice tasks include object search and recovery, surveying underwater obstructions and using a sonar locator.

Trainees also learn to use specialized equipment such as AGA full-face masks and drysuits. Here in the Keys, Sanctuary divers use AGA masks to narrate underwater tours in real-time on the Internet. NOAA Corps personnel need them to perform ship maintenance tasks in polluted harbors, to avoid inhaling contaminated water. NOAA divers also use them for added warmth in cold water dives in such frigid locations as the Bering Sea.

Divers wearing drysuits and AGA masks perform a giant stride entry.

For the students in the class who will routinely dive in cold waters, drysuits will be a way of life. Drysuit training includes practice in controlling buoyancy by adding and venting air from the suits and practice recovering from emergencies unique to drysuits, such as leg-blow-up, a rapid feet-first ascent that can occur when divers work in an inverted position and air shifts to the drysuit legs.

A different kind of dive rounds out the training – a dry dive to one hundred and thirty feet in the college's hyperbaric chamber, which allows students to safely experience the narcotic effects of nitrogen that occur on deep dives. Training in rescue techniques prepares NOAA divers, who often work far from shore, to respond to emergencies.

New working divers leave with a solid foundation in the basics of diving and hands-on experience with equipment and tasks that will help them to fulfill NOAA's mission: "to describe and predict changes in the Earth's environment and conserve and wisely manage the nation's coastal and marine resources."

*Note: This article first appeared in the Spring 2001 issue of the newsletter of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary,* ***Sounding Line****. For more information, visit:floridakeys.noaa.gov.*